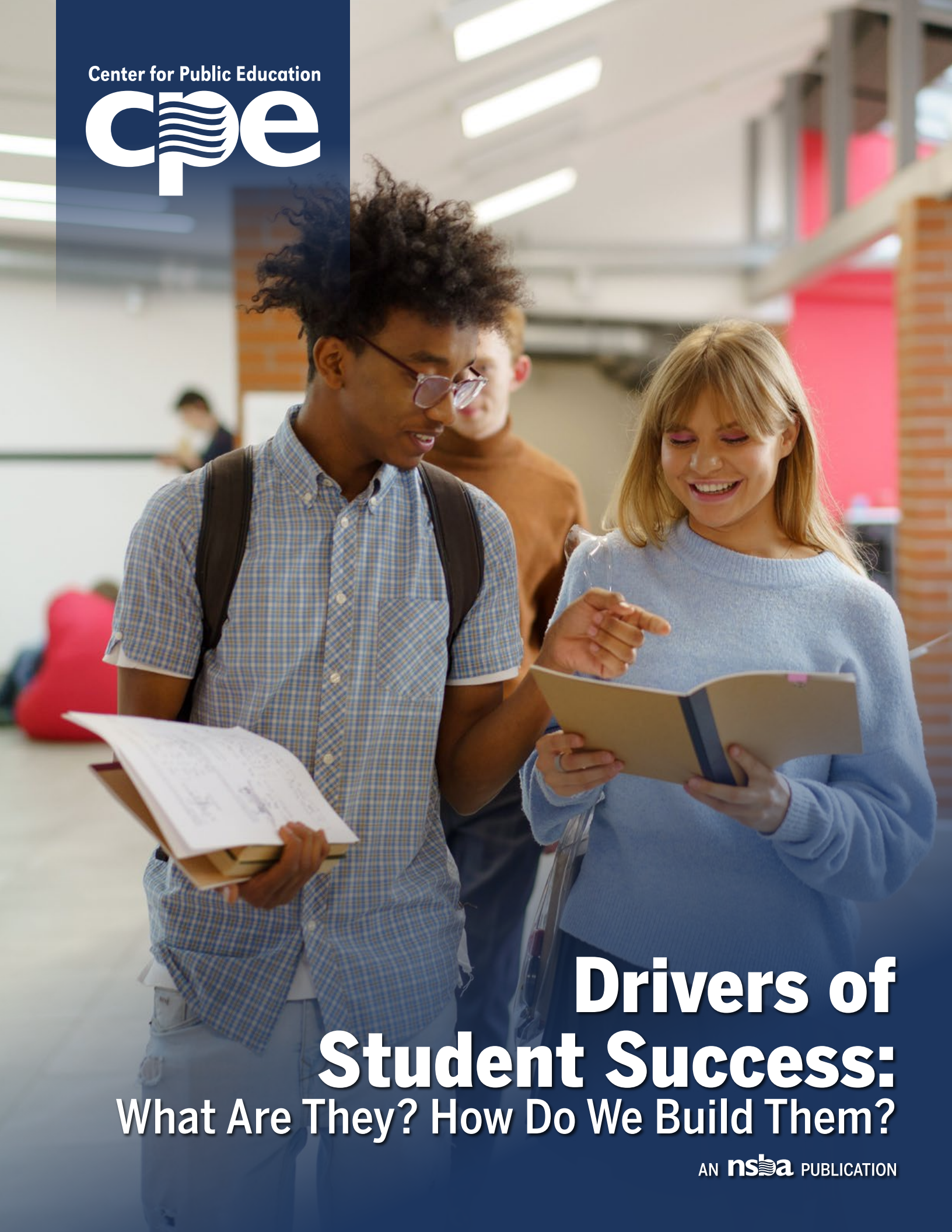
Center for Public Education



Drivers of Student Success:

What Are They? How Do We Build Them?

AN nsba PUBLICATION

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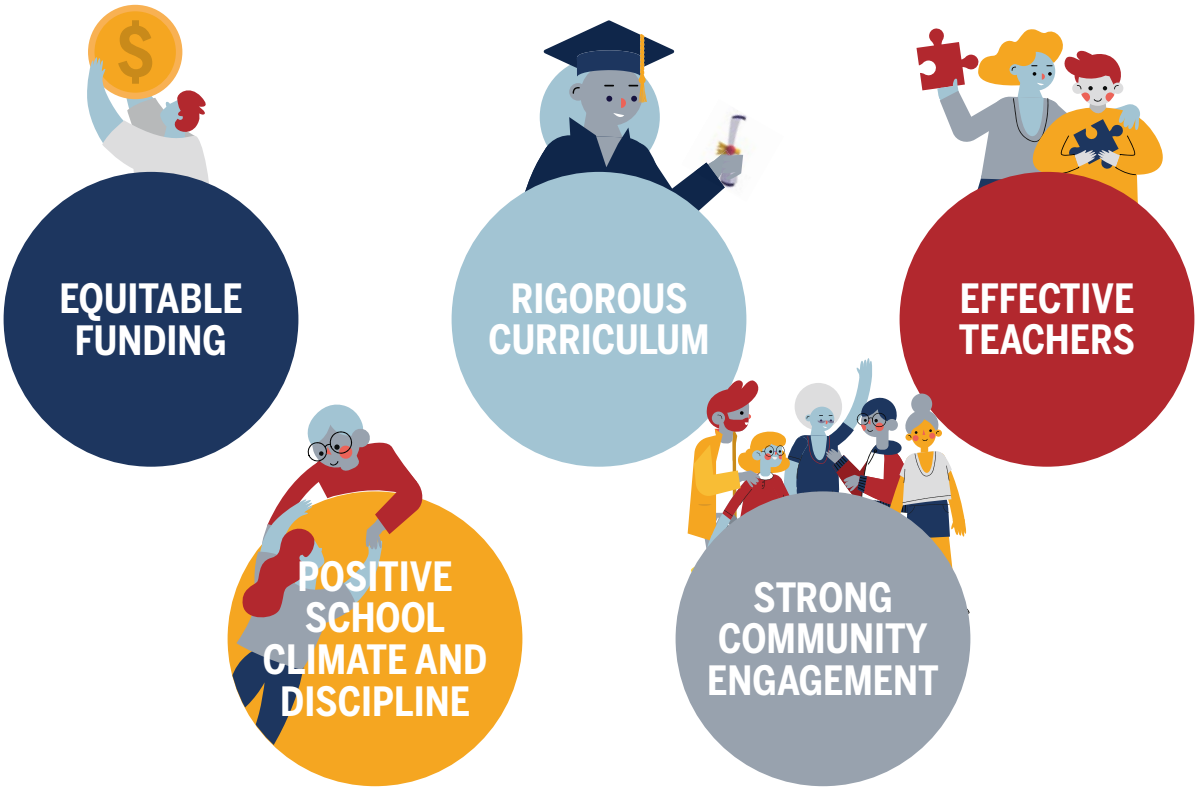
Five Key Drivers of Student Success

1. Equitable Funding — Ensure every school has the resources needed to support high-quality teaching and learning.
2. Rigorous Curriculum — Provide access to challenging, standards-aligned materials that prepare students for college, career, and life.
3. Effective Teachers — Recruit, develop, and retain skilled educators who inspire and engage all learners.
4. Positive School Climate and Discipline — Foster clear expectations, respectful behavior, and safe learning environments.
5. Strong Community Engagement — Build partnerships among families, schools, and local organizations to support student achievement.



Introduction

It's been over 70 years since the U.S. Supreme Court declared education "a right which must be made available to all on equal terms." In ruling that separate was in fact not equal, *Brown v Board of Education* forced federal, state and local governments to open public schools to all children in the community. The decision marked a huge victory for the civil rights movement.

Yet integrating school buildings would prove to be just the first step in an ongoing journey toward educational equity in the nation. There remained — and still remain — structural and social barriers to making a world-class public education "available to all on equal terms." In addition, our ideas about equity have evolved to encompass more than a guarantee that school doors will be open to every child. Advocates are increasingly concerned with

allocating the resources and opportunities to learn that will equip all students for success after high school, recognizing that some students require more support than others to get there.

This has led many to argue for a view of equity that sets the goal as "adequacy," that is, the principle that all students should receive "an adequate education," whatever it takes to provide it (Brighouse & Swift, 2008). As an example of what the difference means in education, consider a district that has a policy of one reading specialist per elementary school. Everyone would agree that this is an equal distribution. However, School A has 15 students who are reading below grade level whereas School B has 250 below grade level readers. Equal distribution is therefore not providing adequate services to the children in School B because the needs in that school are obviously much greater.

In this paper, CPE provides a brief overview of educational equity and its various, sometimes overlapping parts. We begin by reviewing the data on the students served by our public schools. We then describe the areas in an equity agenda that research shows will have the greatest impact on student outcomes: funding, curriculum, teachers, discipline policies, and community engagement. Our hope is to provide a common vocabulary for school boards to help them start conversations in their communities and thereby bring the nation closer to fulfilling its promise of equal opportunity for all.

THE NATIONAL SCHOOL BOARDS ASSOCIATION ON EQUITY

Public schools should provide equitable access and ensure that all students have the knowledge and skills to succeed as contributing members of a rapidly changing, global society, regardless of factors such as race, gender, sexual orientation, ethnic background, English proficiency, immigration status, socioeconomic status, or disability.

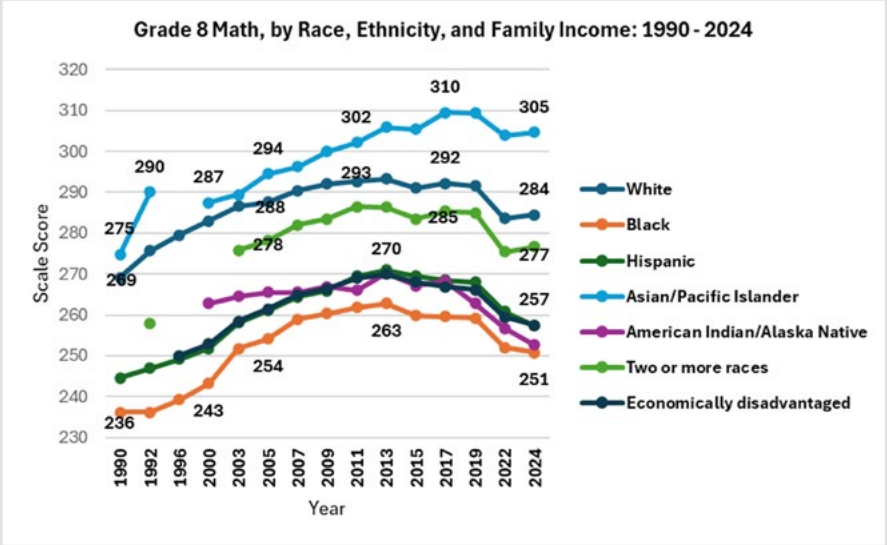
— NSBA Beliefs and Policies

Where We Are

A changing student population: The U.S. is a much more diverse nation than it was around the time of the *Brown* decision. In 1960, 85% of the country was White. The largest minority group, African Americans, comprised 11% of the total population, and Asians, Hispanics and Native Americans represented less than 5% combined. In 2020, nearly all groups saw population gains during the decade and the increase in the Two or More Races population or the Multiracial population was especially large (up 276%). The White alone population declined by 8.6% since 2010 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). The demographic shift is most evident in our public schools, where children of color are already the majority in the western and southern regions of the U.S. (Pew Research, 2021).

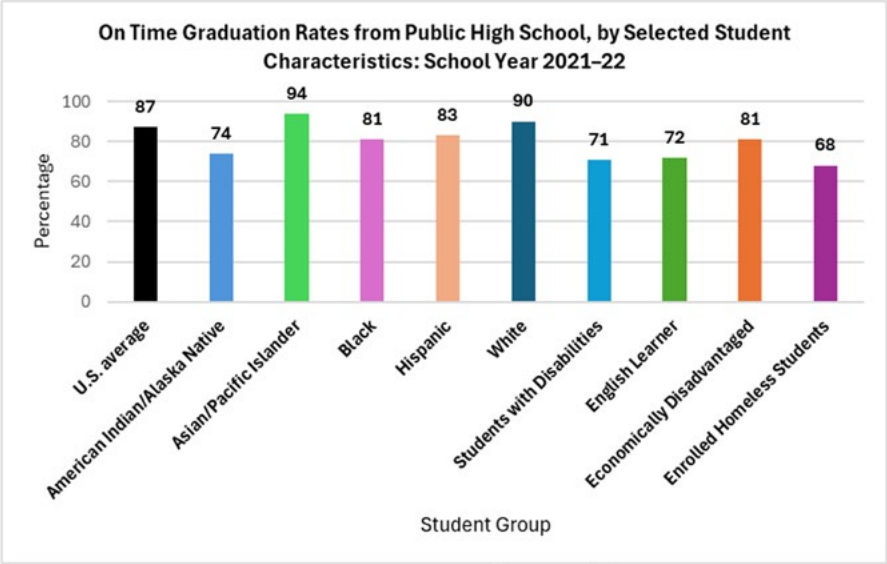
Childhood poverty has also increased. Approximately 10 million children were living in poverty in 2023, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. This corresponds to 13.7% of all children under age 18. In addition, the percentage of English language learners in our schools increased over the last two decades from 8% in 2001 to nearly 11% today (Najarro, 2024).

Chart 1: Achievement gaps between student groups have narrowed slightly but still remain wide.



Source: NAEP, 2025

Chart 2: On-time high graduation rates still show gaps.



Source: NCES, 2024

Distressingly, after decades of progress in integrating schools, we have begun to witness their re-segregation by race and poverty. Gary Orfield and his team at UCLA's Civil Rights Project report that:

- Three-quarters of Black and Latino students attend majority-minority schools; about two in five are in schools where the White population is less than 10%.
- The typical White student attends a school that is three quarters White.
- Minority students are also subject to "double segregation" by race and poverty.
- The typical Black student, for example, attends a school with a two-thirds poverty rate (Civil Rights Project, 2012).

Achievement gaps: Public schools have been steadily improving the performance of all student groups, most notably in math achievement and high school graduation, yet gaps remain. However, the school closures caused by the COVID-19 pandemic erased some of the progress public education had made. (See Charts 1 and 2)

In the U.S. today, our poorest students are nearly four times as likely to fail in math than their wealthiest peers (OECD, 2008). Researchers found that since the pandemic started, the disparity in math scores, specifically, has grown by 11%. In other words, the nation's highest-income districts were nearly four times more likely to recover in math and reading than the lowest-income districts (Turner, 2025). If we are to close the achievement gap completely, we must address current inequities in funding, access to high-level curriculum, access to good teachers, and how school discipline is imposed.

Funding

Money is the clearest indicator of educational equity between districts. The largest share of school revenue comes from state and local dollars. Combined, they support about 90% of the total budget. How these dollars are distributed within states can manifest in sizable revenue gaps between districts based on the poverty rates of the students they serve.

The Economic Policy Institute (Allegretto et al., 2022) found that school districts serving wealthier communities consistently spend and receive more funding per student than those serving poorer ones. In the 2017-2018 school year, districts in the lowest quarter of the poverty distribution averaged **$19,280 in per-student revenue** and **$15,910 in per-student expenditures**. By contrast, districts in the highest quarter of poverty averaged **$16,570 in revenue** and **$14,030 in spending** per student.

This means that high-poverty districts raise **$2,710 less per student** — a **14.1% revenue gap** — and spend **$1,880 less per student**, reflecting an **11.8% spending gap** compared with low-poverty districts. In effect, rather than directing additional resources to where needs are greatest, the funding system delivers about **14% fewer dollars per student** to schools serving the most disadvantaged populations.

Note that funding inequities may be understated. Most experts agree that an equitable distribution of education dollars would take into account the extra costs involved in districts with high proportions of low-income students or students with special needs such as disabilities or English language learners (Augenblick et al, 1997). "Weighted funding formulas" count pupils based on need in order to achieve equity. The federal Title 1 formula, for example, is based on a calculation that assumes educating students in poverty costs 40% more than the basic per pupil allocation.

NSBA'S POSITION ON VOUCHER PROGRAMS

NSBA supports strengthening local school board governance and community engagement in public schools and recognizes the many options and choices offered to students in our public schools. NSBA opposes vouchers, tuition tax credits and similar programs, and charter schools not subject to oversight of the local school boards, effectively creating a separate unaccountable system of publicly funded education which: a) diverts public funding to private schools, private home schools, including virtual schools, regardless of whether they are owned or operated by individuals, religious institutions, not for profit entities, or corporations; b) diverts public funds outside of locally elected, locally accountable, representative oversight; and c) often has the effect of resegregating schools. Public funds should only be used within public schools to advance curricular opportunities, including specialized public school programs authorized by local school boards, such as magnet schools, alternative schools, career and technical education partnerships, advanced placement programs and classes, dual credit programs, postsecondary–high school partnerships and high school-local business partnerships. NSBA urges full accountability of the use of public funds for educational purposes.

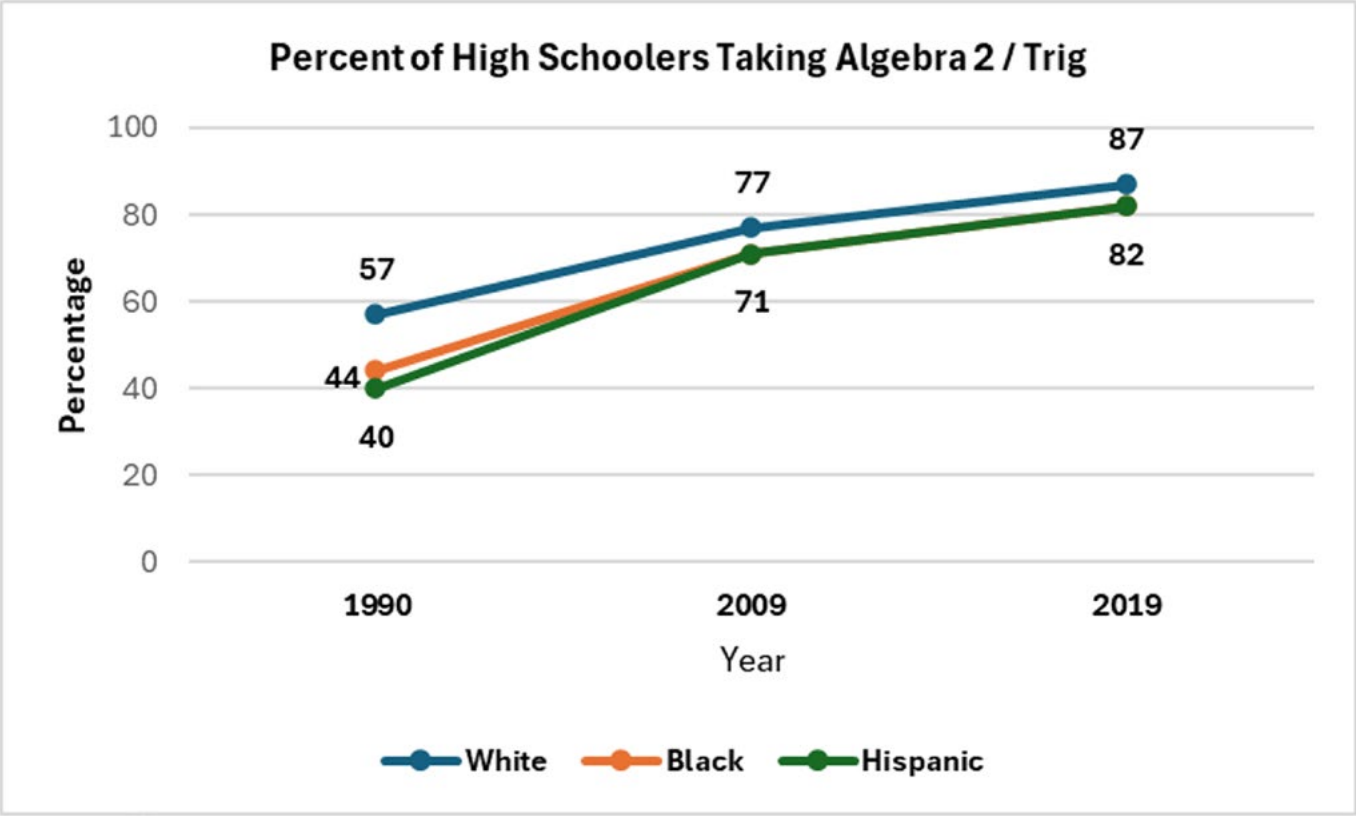
NSBA believes public tax dollars should only support public schools. NSBA opposes any efforts to subsidize tuition or expenses at elementary or secondary private schools, religious schools, or private home/correspondence schools with public tax dollars. Specifically, NSBA opposes vouchers, tax credits, and tax subsidies for use at nonpublic K-12 schools.

High-Level Curriculum

It goes without saying that students are not likely to learn subject matter they are not taught. Achieving educational equity, therefore, demands more than distributing funds more fairly. We must also guarantee that students have equal access to high-level curriculum.

This is actually one area where American schools have been making good gains. In 1990, only half of U.S. students had the benefit of Algebra II and Trigonometry, and gaps based on race were wide: 57% of White high schoolers had taken these courses, compared to 44% of Black and 40% of Hispanic students. By 2019, however, not only were these high-level math courses being taken by more than 80% of our students, the racial gaps had nearly closed. (See Chart 3)

Chart 3: Today's students have greater access to high-level math than ever before and gaps between student groups have narrowed considerably.



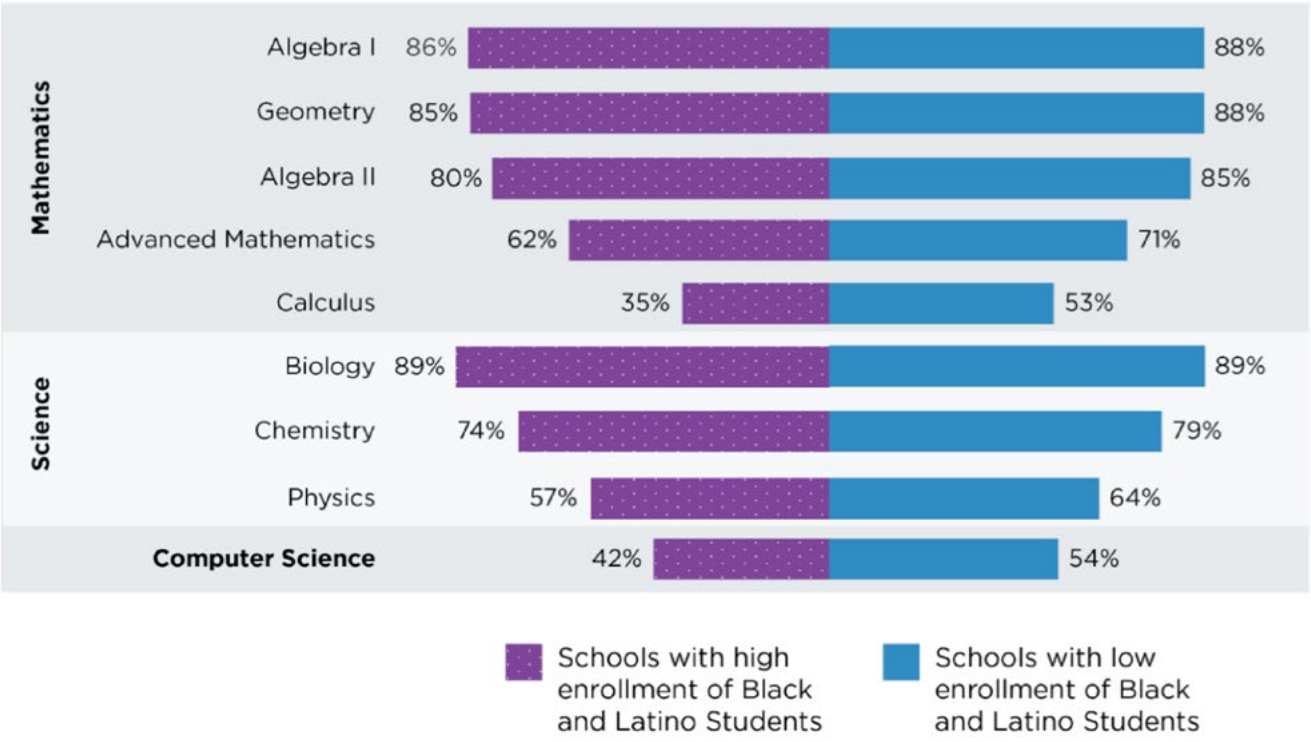
Source: NCES, 2022

Nonetheless, data from the Office of Civil Rights in the U.S. Department of Education shows that we still have schools that are not providing courses students need to succeed after high school. In 2022, 20% of high schools serving high percentages of Black and Hispanic students did not offer Algebra II and a stunning 14% could not even provide Algebra I. Access to lab sciences is even worse: 26% of the high schools serving high percentages of Black and Hispanic students did not offer chemistry and 43% did not have physics courses. (Chart 4) Schools serving high proportions of students of color were the most likely to fall in this category (OCR, 2024).

Access to high-level curriculum needs to start long before high school, of course. School districts need to make sure elementary and middle schools provide a curriculum to all students that places them on track to graduate college- and career-ready. High-quality pre-kindergarten needs to be part of the mix, too. Good early education is especially beneficial to children from low-income or non-English speaking families by helping them start school with the same skills as their classmates from more advantaged circumstances (CPE, 2008).

Chart 4: Not all high schools provide high-level math and science courses.

Percent of Public High Schools Offering Mathematics, Science, and Computer Science Courses, by Course and Black and Hispanic/Latino Enrollment: 2021-2022



Source: OCR, 2025

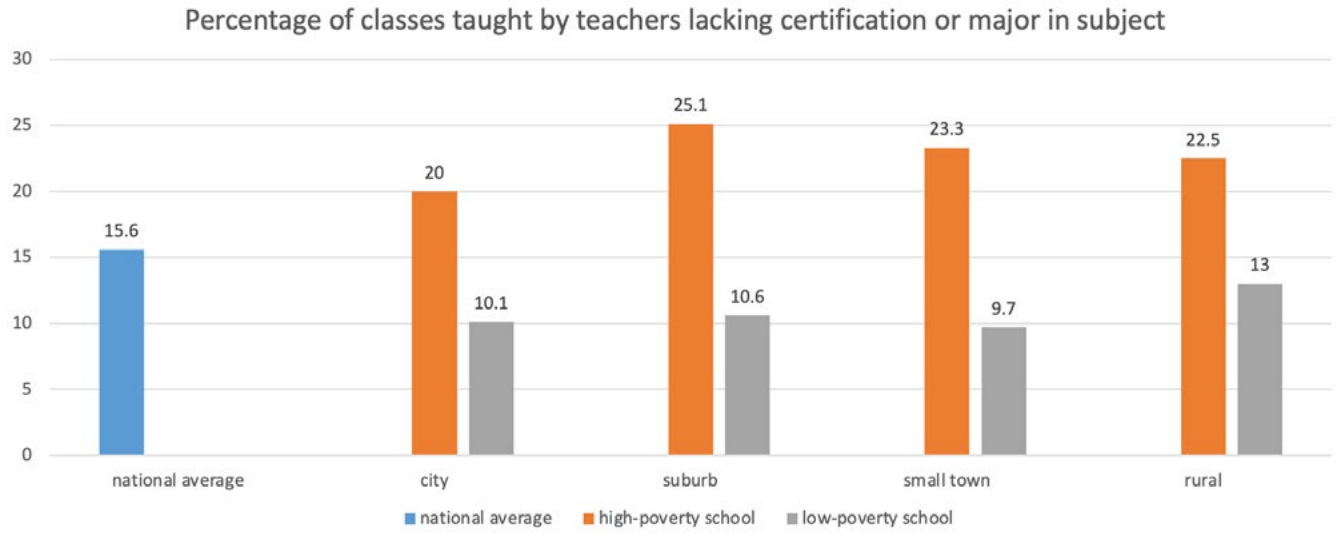
Good Teacher

Teachers have more influence on student learning than any other school factor (CPE, 2009). Moreover, the impact of high-performing teachers has been shown to be similar regardless of school characteristics, making teacher quality a major element in equity plans (Reform Support Network, 2015).

There is no single way to define teacher quality. Experience, credentials, and academic background have all been shown to have an effect on student learning in varying degrees. In addition, new "growth" or "value-added" measures have been developed to relate student gains to individual teachers. In truth, all of these indicators matter.

By some measures, the qualifications of the nation's teaching force have been improving in recent years. For example, new teachers are stronger academically than their counterparts 20 years ago based on SAT scores and the number of master's degrees (Goldhaber & Walch, 2014). Yet we still are not fully able to grant all students fair access to qualified teachers. Whether quality is defined as certification, subject knowledge, or impact, poor students and children of color are less likely to be taught by well qualified teachers than their peers. (See Chart 5)

Chart 5: High-poverty high schools are most likely to have classes taught by teachers out of their field



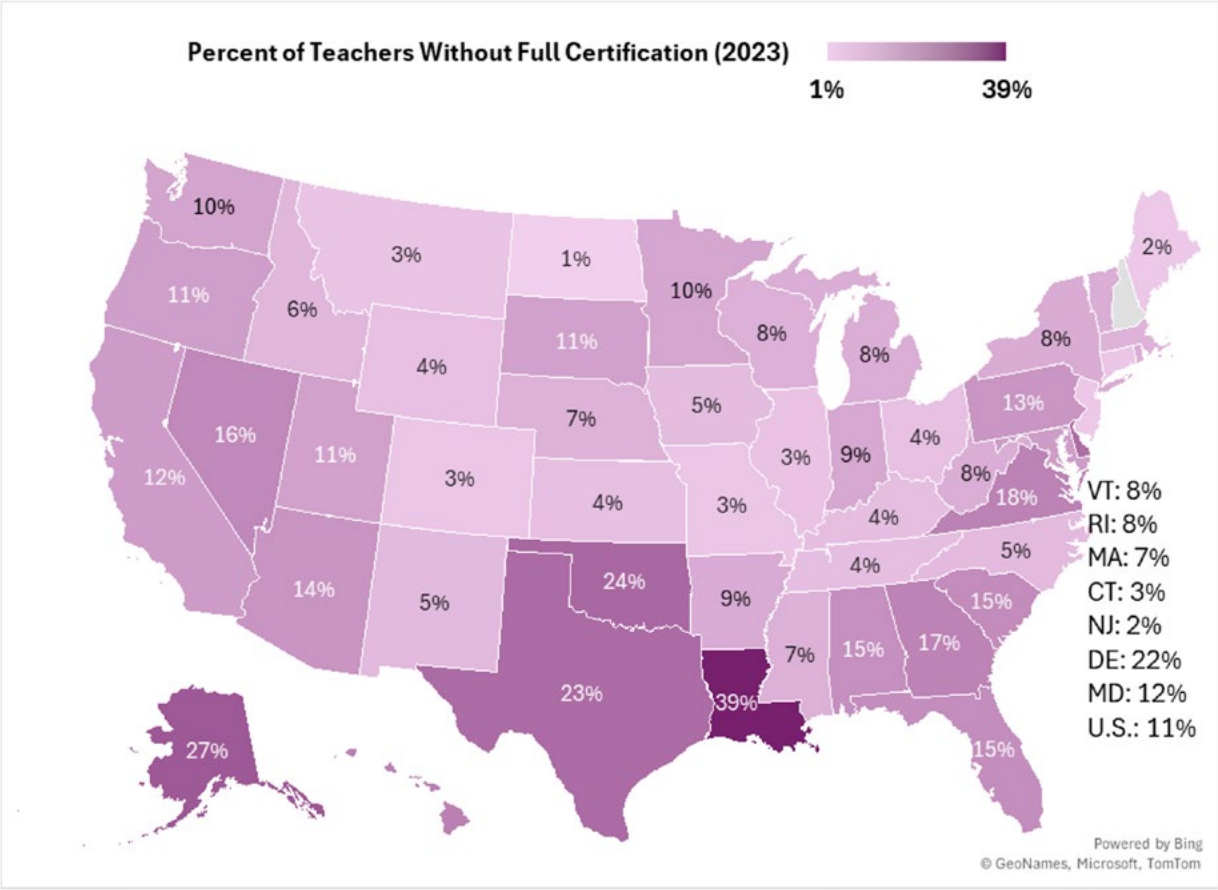
SOURCE: Education Trust, 2010. 2007-08 data.

In high-poverty (over 50%) high schools, for example, 52.4% of teachers were fully certified compared to 61.1% elsewhere. In addition, fewer new teachers in poor schools had any practical teaching experience as part of their training prior to taking charge of their classrooms: 39.3% had student teaching credits compared to 51.1% in wealthier schools. Similar gaps are present in schools based on the enrollment of students of color (NCES, 2012).

"Effective teachers"— that is, teachers whose impact on student learning is above the average — also tend to disproportionately serve in wealthier schools. In one southern state, highly effective teachers comprised 15% of the staff in high-poverty, high-minority schools, but were 20% in low-poverty, low-minority schools (Reform Support Network, 2015).

Despite national attention, the shortage of high-quality teachers in districts serving large numbers of students from disadvantaged backgrounds has remained largely unchanged over the past decade. The U.S. Government Accountability Office (2022) found that teacher shortages are most acute in western and southern states, rural and urban areas, and high-poverty communities. In Louisiana, nearly two in five teachers lack full certification, while in Alaska, Texas, and Oklahoma, roughly one in four teachers are not fully certified. (See Chart 6)

Chart 6: School districts in western and southern states are more likely to have classes taught by teachers out of their field.



Source: Learning Policy Institute, 2024

In response, the federal government expanded teacher apprenticeship programs to 34 states in 2024, offering affordable pathways for more individuals to enter the profession. Federal support also continues to strengthen state and local efforts to cultivate teacher pipelines from within communities through "Grow Your Own" programs. These initiatives often include dual-enrollment courses and scholarships for local high school students who commit to returning home to teach.

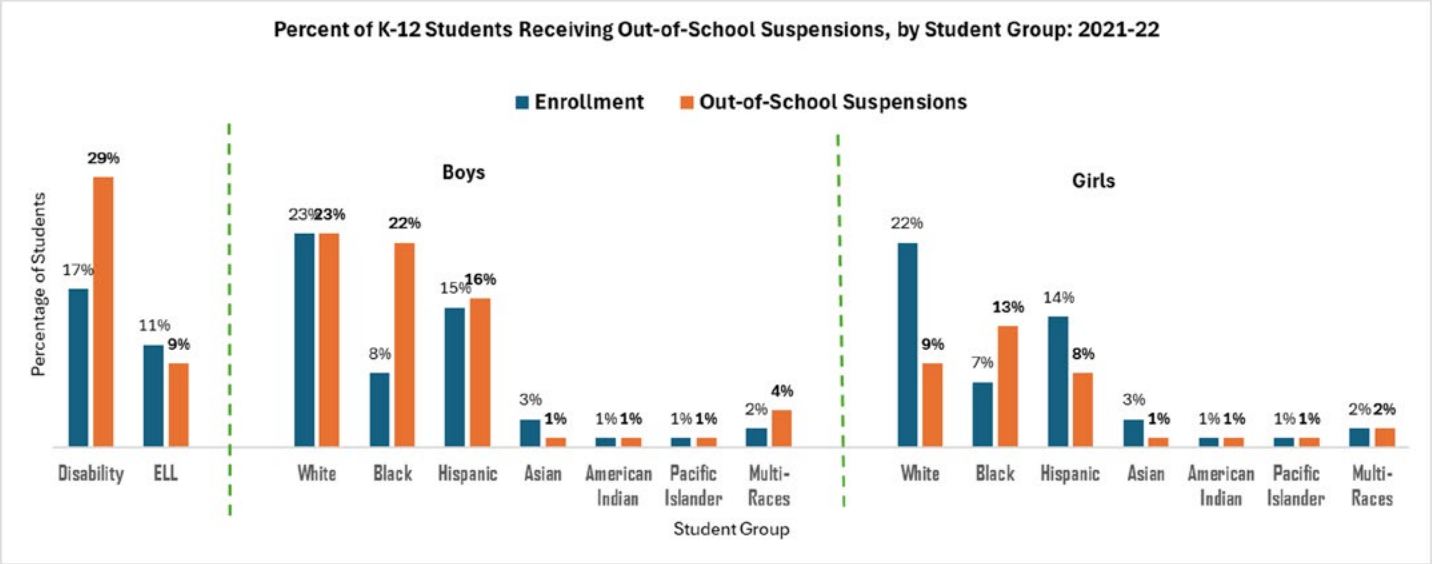
Discipline

We've established that in order for students to be successful, they need access to well-funded schools, high-level curriculum and qualified teachers. They also need to actually be in school to get the benefit of these resources. An analysis of NAEP scores, for example, showed that eighth graders who were absent three or more days in the past month were significantly outscored by their classmates who were present every day: 50% of students with absences scored at the basic level or better compared to 68% of those with none (NCES, 2024).

Absenteeism has many causes, but discipline policies that make heavy use of out-of-school suspensions are among them and can place students at risk of academic failure. In addition, students with multiple suspensions have a higher likelihood of dropping out, and can even lead to worse outcomes — substance abuse and delinquency in the community (Losen et al., 2015).

Such policies can produce a harmful school climate for students overall. But they also have a disproportionate effect on students of color and students with disabilities.

Chart 7: Suspension rates by student group show gaps, 2021-22.

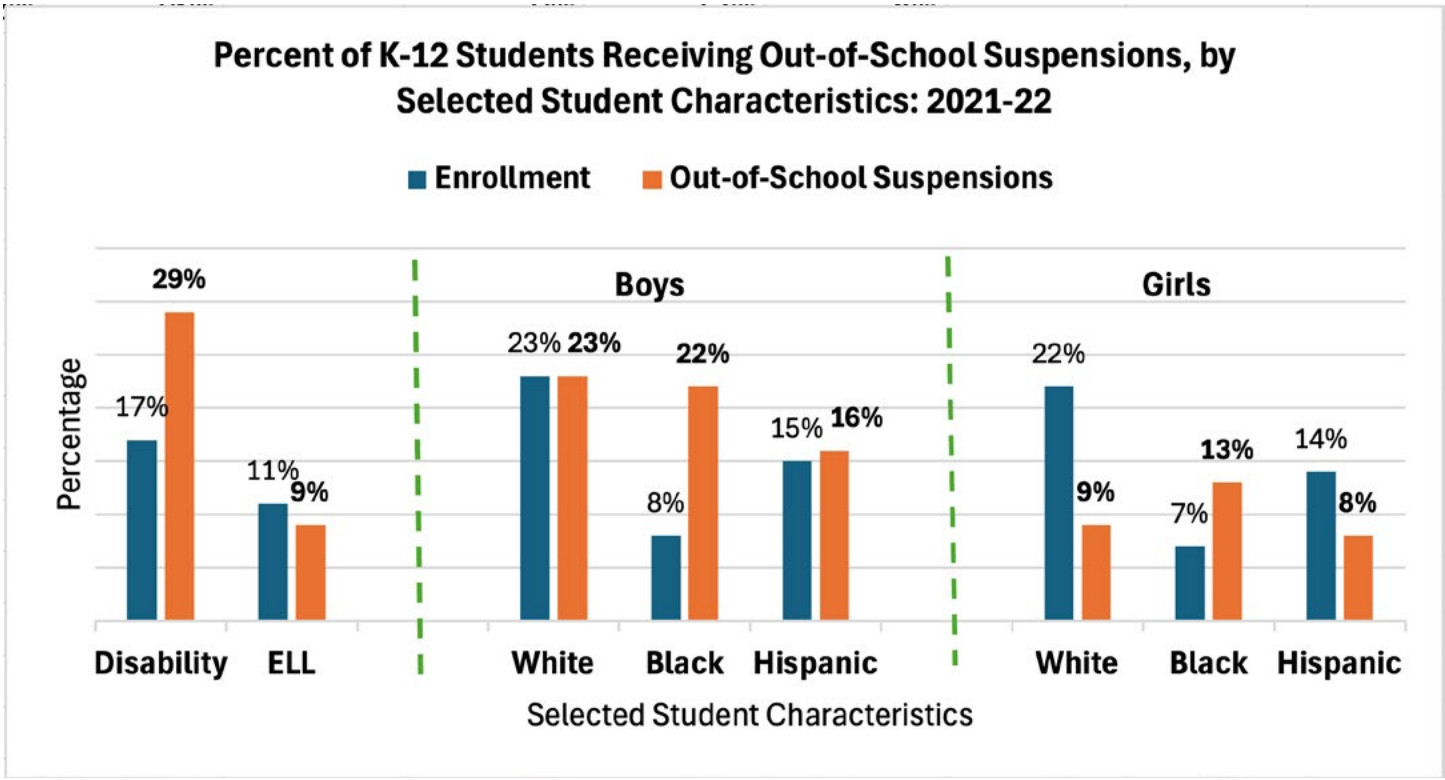


Source: OCR, 2025

According to NSBA's policy guide on out-of-school suspensions, "African American, Latino and Native American students, in particular, are far more likely to be suspended, expelled, and arrested than their White peers, even when accused of similar behavior" (NSBA, 2013).

An in-depth study of discipline in Texas schools examined referral rates of students by race between seventh and twelfth grades (Chart 8). The researchers discovered that Black students were far more likely than their White or Hispanic classmates to be given an out-of-school suspension for a first disciplinary referral. This finding calls into question any suggestion that students of color are suspended more often because they are breaking more rules than White students. At the very least, it should prompt school leaders to look more closely at their policies and the students they affect.

Chart 8: Black students are disproportionately represented in out-of-school suspensions.

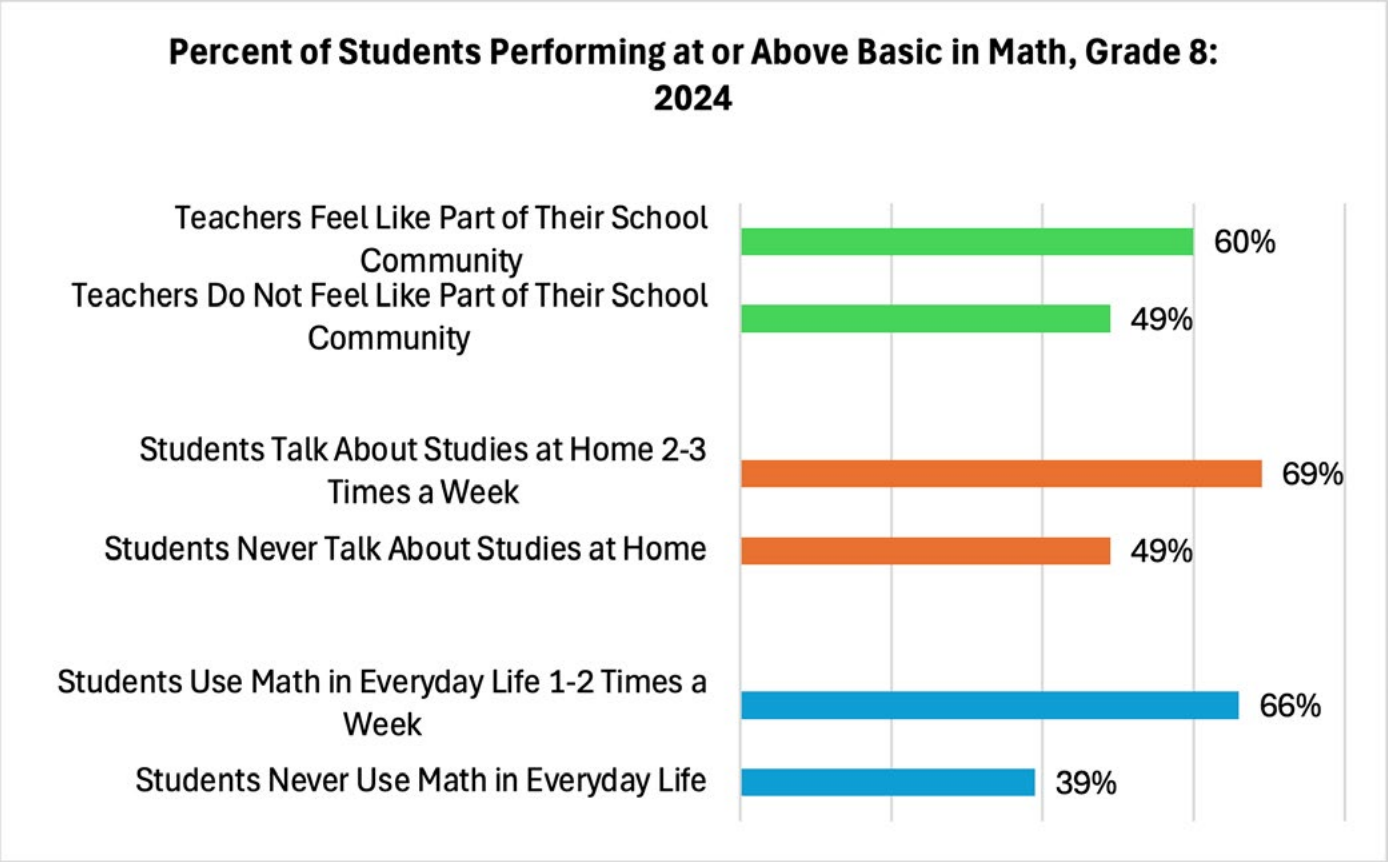


Source: OCR, 2025

Community Engagement

For district leaders, community engagement means fostering a collaborative culture among educators, parents, advocates, and local partners. Data from the 2024 Nation's Report Card (NAEP) reveal clear differences in achievement between students whose teachers feel connected to their school community and those whose teachers do not, as well as between students with and without supportive home learning environments. For instance, 60% of eighth graders perform at or above the basic level in math when their teachers report feeling part of the school community, compared with only 49% when teachers lack that sense of belonging. (See Chart 9)

Chart 9: Students tend to achieve more academically when their teachers feel connected to the school community and when they have supportive learning environments at home.



Source: NAEP, 2024

Researchers have long emphasized the positive impact of strong family and community partnerships on student outcomes. Wood and Bauman (2017) note that schools actively engaging families and communities tend to see improved student achievement. Literature shows that engagement at home or parent communication with students about school (e.g., talking about school experiences, knowing how well the student is doing in school) was a statistically significant predictor of grades and days missed at school. Students with more engaged parents had higher academic achievement and missed fewer days of school.

In one study involving parents of third, fourth, and fifth grade students at a Title I school in a western state — where nearly 90% of students lived in an urban gated housing community — researchers found that parent empowerment through participation in a parent engagement program was significantly and positively linked to students' reading achievement (Alameda-Lawson, 2014).

Another study examined the Families and Schools Together (FAST) program, which sought to build empowering networks of parents by bringing families together in school settings. Meetings were held with both parents and children present, but were led and designed by parents themselves. Families met as a group, then separated into peer circles for parents and children before reuniting for joint playtime. These gatherings helped parents build relationships with one another and strengthen home–school connections for their children. Two years after completing the FAST program, teachers rated participating Latino elementary students in Milwaukee as having significantly stronger social and academic skills and lower levels of aggressive behavior than students in a comparison group (McDonald et al., 2006).

So, what are the most effective strategies for community engagement? Research highlights several key approaches: strengthening communication between schools and families, fostering trusting and lasting family–school relationships, aligning parents' academic aspirations with students' learning goals, and partnering with community organizations alongside families. Together, these strategies have been shown to enhance both student achievement and overall school performance.

School boards are a vital bridge between schools and communities, shaping how residents engage with local education. Most board members report being actively involved in community activities. Research (2021) shows that meetings with structured deliberation and open dialogue between board members and the public lead to higher attendance at future meetings and greater trust in school officials.

Yet the landscape is increasingly polarized. *Education Week* (2024) notes that "a divisive political climate for school boards has led to packed meetings, bursts of misinformation, and even threats of violence" against elected officials who once maintained a low profile. Despite their influence, there remains limited national data on how school boards function or how their decisions affect student learning outcomes.

To fill this gap, Jonathan E. Collins, assistant professor of political science and education at Teachers College, Columbia University, founded the School Board and Youth Engagement Lab (S-BYE). The lab seeks to build a national dataset on how school boards are elected, how they interact with the public, and how their practices shape community engagement. It also plans to partner with local boards to pilot new communication tools that promote transparency and public trust.

Encouragingly, initiatives like S-BYE signal a growing effort to provide data-driven strategies that strengthen civic participation and restore confidence in local education governance.

EXAMPLES OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN SCHOOL DISTRICTS

According to *American School Board Journal* (ASBJ, 2025), many districts—particularly in urban areas—are adopting innovative strategies to strengthen community engagement.

Illinois — Prairie-Hills Elementary School District 144

The district's new **Family Engagement Center** has launched several initiatives to meet families' academic and nonacademic needs:

- **The Hills Market Food Pantry**, created in partnership with the Greater Chicago Food Depository, provides free, fresh produce, pantry staples, and nutritious foods.
- **The Hills Boutique** offers free school uniforms, gently used clothing, household items, and school supplies.
- **Emergency Housing Support** assists families experiencing housing instability.
- **Share Your Genius** provides extended learning opportunities to close achievement gaps and promote personal growth.

New Jersey — Plainfield Public Schools

Serving about 10,000 students, the district is building a districtwide framework for strategic community engagement.

- Existing programs such as the **Parent Academy** and **Advisory Councils** now operate under clearer goals, stronger accountability, and greater inclusivity.
- New efforts—including the **Think Tank Book Club, Universal Preschool**, and **Student Advisory Council**—emphasize student voice, school climate, and whole-child development.

New York — Buffalo Public Schools (BPS)

Community engagement has expanded systemwide, with **58 of 60 schools** operating under community engagement models—**22 Community Schools** and **36 Partnership Schools**. Two additional schools receive shared engagement resources through co-location.

- A signature initiative, the **Saturday Academies**, offers educational, recreational, cultural, and wellness activities at 22 community school sites. Schools across Buffalo host these events on **seven to eight Saturdays each year**, opening their doors to families and community members of all ages. Programs last year included hands-on STEM activities with drones, slime-making crafts, origami tutorials, yoga lessons, cooking demonstrations, CPR classes, and oral health exams. Almost 36,000 visitors engaged in a Saturday Academy program in 2024-25.
- Partnerships with long-standing community-based organizations (CBOs), such as Say Yes Buffalo, are integral to the planning and funding of the events. CBOs, for example, employ Community School Navigators at each school, who work full-time to facilitate the development, implementation, and management of community school activities, events, programs, and services, including Saturday Academies.

Toward an Equitable System for all Students

The equity issues addressed in this brief — funding, high-level curriculum, good teachers, and discipline policies — by no means represent an exhaustive list. Unmentioned but also important resources for assuring equity include extra academic supports for low-performing students; access to technology both in school and at home; comprehensive family services; mentorships and trained counselors, and more. Nonetheless we have attempted to present those elements of education that research shows have the most impact on student learning and therefore deserve close attention when developing equity plans.

School leaders who want to make sure their schools are equitable should first look at their data:

- What is our performance by school and by student group?
- Do all schools have adequate funding? Do funds flow to schools according to need?
- Do we provide high-level curriculum in all of our schools? Do our high schools offer course sequences in high-level math from Algebra I to calculus, and science from biology to physics? Do we offer AP courses, and is access open to all? Do we provide extra supports to struggling students and have policies in place to make sure they get the benefit of these supports?
- What are the qualifications of our teaching staff? Is teacher quality distributed equitably among schools as well as within the school building? Do all student groups have fair access to the best teachers? Are teachers well-supported? Do we reward teachers who serve the neediest students?
- How do our overall discipline rates compare to other districts? Do we suspend students more often than others? Are discipline rates similar for all student groups? Do we have enough school counselors and trained mentors to support students and work in partnership with families?
- Finally, do we monitor our progress? Do we make adjustments when needed? Are all of our students learning, engaged, and on track to graduate college- and career-ready?

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Center for Public Education

About CPE

The National School Boards Association (NSBA) believes that accurate, objective information is essential to building support for public schools and creating effective programs to prepare all students for success. As NSBA's research branch, the Center for Public Education (CPE) provides objective and timely information about public education and its importance to the well-being of our nation. Launched in 2006, CPE emerged from discussions between NSBA and its member state school boards associations about how to inform the public about the successes and challenges of public education. To serve a wide range of audiences, including parents, teachers, and school leaders, CPE offers research, data, and analysis on current education issues and explores ways to improve student achievement and engage support for public schools.

About NSBA

Founded in 1940, the National School Boards Association (NSBA) is a nonprofit organization representing state associations of school boards and the Board of Education of the U.S. Virgin Islands. Through its member state associations that represent locally elected school board officials serving millions of public school students, NSBA advocates for equity and excellence in public education through school board leadership. We believe that public education is a civil right necessary to the dignity and freedom of the American people and that each child, regardless of their disability, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, or citizenship, deserves equitable access to an education that maximizes their individual potential.

For more information, visit **nsba.org.**